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A CASE FOR TRANSLATION.

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MOST OF THE CRITICISMS OF TRANSLATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL LANGUAGE COURSES FOCUS ON THE SUPPOSEDLY DIFFICULT PROBLEMS OF SELECTING, USING, AND GRADING TRANSLATION TESTS AS OPPOSED TO THE OBJECTIVE TESTS GENERALLY USED BY ADVOCATES OF AUDIOLINGUALISM. BUT MOST OF THESE CRITICISMS FAIL TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE PROCESS OF LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TAKES PLACE LARGELY THROUGH ENGLISH AT THE MENTAL LEVEL, AND, BECAUSE ONE LANGUAGE IS USUALLY DOMINANT IN THE MIND OVER ANOTHER, THOUGHT AND MEANING TRANSFERRENCE, I.E., TRANSLATION, IS INEVITABLE. ALSO, THE CHARGE OF SUBJECTIVITY CAN BE DISMISSED IF TEACHERS WILL CHOOSE AND ASSESS PASSAGES FOR TRANSLATION CAREFULLY, DETERMINE A SCALE OF MARKS AND AN INDEX OF DIFFICULTY FOR DIFFERENT STAGES IN THE COURSE, AND GRADE THE PASSAGES BY A RATIONAL MARKING SCHEME AND A SET OF RULINGS ON VARIANTS. TRANSLATIONS, MOREOVER, CAN TEST BOTH GENERAL AND SPECIFIC VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR ITEMS PERHAPS MORE EFFICIENTLY THAN DO OBJECTIVE TESTS BECAUSE THE LATTER CONTAIN BUILT IN CLUES AND THE POSSIBILITY OF OBTAINING GOOD SCORES BY RANDOM GUESSING. FINALLY, TRANSLATION IS A VERY EFFECTIVE METHOD OF TEACHING STUDENTS, EVEN IN THE LOWER GRADES, HOW TO SYNTHESIZE WHAT THEY LEARN, AND OF HELPING THEM TO DISCERN ACCURACY, STYLE, QUESTIONS AND SHADES OF MEANING, GRAMMAR, AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "BABEL," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3, OCTOBER 1967, PAGES 7-11. (RW)

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A CASE FOR TRANSLATION

C. B. THORNTON-SMITH*

THE purpose of this paper is:

- to list some of the arguments most frequently advanced against use of translation in secondary teaching and testing of modern languages
- to discuss the validity of these arguments
- to sum up very briefly what may be regarded as the virtues of translation
- to suggest some criteria for selection of translation passages and in particular of translation tests.

There are various objections to translation at the school level, some of them based on a questioning of the motives of those advocating translation, some of them arising from dissatisfaction with what actually seems to be achieved by it, and a large number set forth by the more doctrinaire exponents of the audio-lingual approach and of objective-format tests.

The third group will occupy me most, and lest I appear to be excessively concerned with them, I must stress that I am not interested in making a case against audio-lingualism and objective-format testing as such, but in replying to some of the criticisms of translation which have recently been made on their behalf.

Typical criticisms of translation are:

- it is an unnatural linguistic activity, not related to how pupils should operate within the foreign language, and therefore not really relevant to the learning of it
- translation passages are chosen on a subjective basis, with no proper attention to level and spread of difficulty. This means that the scale of marks is often determined after the event by seeing how the pupils have actually performed. The scale has to remedy the unfortunate choice of passage
- it is impossible to assess and compare the objective difficulty of translation passages, and thereby to establish standards of achievement
- translation tests only a small number of the items of grammatical structure and core vocabulary set out in the syllabus and thus only a small proportion of the candidate's possible knowledge, so that the "luck of the draw" regarding a particular set of vocabulary items may not give a true picture of his ability. This is particularly so if the set of items is a rare one. Moreover, it is likely that some items are tested several times, and others not at all
- marking of translations is subjective, which means that teachers have little chance of predicting their pupils' performance at the end of the year
- written translation is a specialized art, not the concern of schools but of university language departments. Academics naturally tend to think it must be good for schools too, and try to impose it on them
- the present trend is for other techniques to take part of the place once occupied by translation in the syllabus; its logical extension is that translation must eventually disappear
- translation is too hard for the average pupil, and imposes on him a tiresome, unrewarding process of dictionary-thumbing
- correction of translations imposes a burden of dull monotony on the teacher.

Firstly, is translation an unnatural activity, not related to how pupils should operate in language learning? At one level, this is certainly so: when, for instance, pupils are expected to deal with extracts too far removed from a contemporary style or context, but the objection is easily met by judicious selection.

The unnaturalness argument relates more fundamentally to the nature of thought, the nature of language, and learning theory. Do we think in a certain language? If so, under what conditions can we learn to think in another language? If we do learn to, what are the connections and barriers between the two systems in our own minds? It seems that the unnaturalness charge would assume these questions to have been definitively answered along lines suggesting that translation falsifies or runs counter to fairly basic mental processes. In fact, these issues are far from being decided one way or the other, so that one cannot claim too fundamental a justification for any particular technique.

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I think one assumption behind not only translation but also some types of objective-format work is that much of the process of learning French, for instance, takes place through English at the mental level. It is possible that even spoken French of high fluency by an English speaker is a form of what we might call spontaneous or instant translation. In the average classroom this seems likely to be the case to a large extent, and need not be apologized for.

An important exception could occur with very young children responding so vividly to a French life situation presented by intense direct method teaching that their English responses would be by-passed. However, sheer lack of time, the overwhelming preponderance of English in the environment, the child's growing demand for rational explanations and his propensity to make comparisons all prevent pure direct method being used right through the course. Even given all the mechanical aids imaginable at the moment, we cannot reproduce the experience of a child learning French in France.

Unless we assume the existence of thought independent of language, but amenable to expression in two or more different and completely watertight language systems, it seems reasonable to assume that one language is usually dominant in the mind over another, which would suggest that thought and expression in the other involve some form of transfer. This could mean that in all but the most immediate and elementary responses we continue to think in English, which places us in much the same position as the *bourgeois gentilhomme* — we are translating without knowing it.

Far from being an unnatural activity, translation is in one sense what learning and speaking a foreign language is all about. Otherwise one must posit the existence of a sort of linguistic schizophrenia in those who speak more than one language. And if one's capacities in the foreign and the native language are in completely watertight compartments, a lot of the justification for teaching languages would seem to be invalidated in any case.

If in fact we assume that there are pupils who are able to produce a wide range of spoken French with absolute spontaneity and no apparent passing through or reference to English, and if they are also literate in French, just what would there be to prevent them, after some reflection, from writing down the French for an English passage commensurate in complexity with their French utterances, when they can so spontaneously say the French for what is in their minds?

The argument that translation is unnatural is sometimes explicitly based on what I would regard as an unreal compartmentalization of skills. If for instance comprehension and translation are regarded as two quite distinct skills, we can theoretically have pupils fully understanding a passage but quite unable to translate it, or stranger still, able to translate it without knowing what it is all about. Similarly, if the two translation skills are posited as existing over and above the oral-aural pair and the reading-writing pair, is one saying any more than that, apart from a considerable overlap of skills, some further mental operations are called into play?

It is true that translation passages are sometimes chosen without due regard to their difficulty and spread of vocabulary and grammar. But there is no reason why this should be so. Due attention to the passage selected, skilful doctoring where necessary, and comparison with earlier passages on which a class or group has performed, all help to eliminate the subjective element.

On the matter of determining the scale of marks after the event, I have two comments to make. First, in the past two years, at least, to limit matters to my own direct knowledge, nothing of the sort has been found necessary in marking Victorian Matriculation French translations, and there is no reason why it ever should be, given due care. A scale has been discussed, agreed upon, and applied. Secondly, in some situations there is no great harm in deciding the cut-off point after viewing the performance. One is simply using a wider body of evidence as to the group's ability to determine the cut-off point in a particular case. The actual criteria for marking of course remain the same, and whether the scale means what we call hard or easy marking, the vast majority of translations are very effective in ranking a group and in indicating specific areas of weakness.

The alleged inherent subjectivity of the use of translation passages sometimes begs the question of the real objectivity of objective-format tests. The adoption of a certain format is of itself no guarantee that the items represent a genuine spread, that they set a correct standard, or that they will impose a cut-off point where other criteria tell us it would be desirable to have it. Although the correction of such tests is usually objective (but not always), their

compilation can suffer from much the same subjectivity as selection of a translation passage can. The onus is on both approaches for a very close scrutiny of their procedures.

The assertion that different translation passages cannot be compared objectively is based more on what may have been done than on what can be done. A check is often made of the difficulty of a passage on a comparative basis: what difficulties does it present as against last year's or last term's or last week's piece? But this has usually taken place, as has been rightly pointed out, by a process of more or less enlightened guesswork, perhaps not even accompanied by an actual working of the passage as a check.

I think the criticism could be met by the devising of what might be called an index of difficulty which could be applied to any passage. This would take into account all relevant matters such as frequency of vocabulary items, spelling difficulties, grammatical constructions etc., with of course quite different lists depending on whether the native language is the source or the target. The best system of devising it would seem to be by study of a large number of scripts to determine what items candidates find most difficult, and by the attribution on this basis of a number of points of difficulty to each item in a sentence and to structural difficulties of the sentence itself. Any passage could then be given a difficulty rating and suitably modified if necessary to the specific stage in the course or to the final desired standard. Once such an index were established its application would be a comparatively simple matter, and perhaps far less time-consuming than devising new sets of valid objective-format questions.

The same principle can also be applied to the coverage of grammar and vocabulary in a passage. These can be easily checked against a previously-established list. In translations for teaching purposes, representative spread of items will of course often be replaced by concentration on specific items.

The criticism that a translation passage tests only a small part of the course and of the candidate's actual knowledge is hardly news, and is not really a valid point to make except in extreme cases. It applies to virtually any sort of test, for the point of testing is not usually to review the whole of the candidate's knowledge, but to check on a number of items which may be reasonably taken as representative of the course and of what the candidate should know. An objective-format test also has to work on the basis of a representative sample, and it is doubtful whether in an equal amount of time it can test as many items as a translation piece. The comparison is difficult to make, but one could start by converting a translation passage into a series of objective-format questions. It is virtually impossible to do so, for reasons which will emerge, but the attempt soon runs into many items, with a considerable bulk of sheer reading for the candidate and an unnatural slowing down of many of the mental operations involved. One reply here will be of course that the slowing down is beneficial, that it forces the candidate to reflect on the specific point at each stage. But in fact what is then highlighted is the way in which objective-format tests for grammatical or vocabulary items tend to contain a number of built-in cues. If the format is multiple-choice, such as selecting the correct form out of four, the candidate is immediately aware that one of the forms is correct. This is very different from having to provide it himself from among the infinite possibilities theoretically presenting themselves in what I think can be justifiably called the more real context of a translation passage. What is more, the complete ignoramus is the victim of an unjust fate if he gets less than 25% by picking at random. This factor makes measurement somewhat crude, and it is no real answer to suggest that one of the four items should be "I don't know". It is only the culpably honest ignoramus who will fail to exploit his one-in-three chance of picking the right solution. Even in more difficult types of objective-format question there is a high degree of prompting or directing of attention to the specific problem.

One might add that many objective-format items either explicitly or implicitly take the form of what one might call "micro-translations". The correct French word for an English word has to be chosen from a short list, or a sentence has to be changed in a way which will almost inevitably involve mental translation, however undesirable theoretically this is deemed to be.

This is not to deny that a well designed objective-format test is an extremely valuable means of stressing or testing specific grammatical points. But the ingenious analysis of language which it involves should surely lead eventually to synthesis. It seems to be arresting the outcome of a process to say "We'll let you tackle all the little bits, but never ask you to put them together". The translation wood must not always remain obscured by the objective-format trees.

The "luck of the draw" criticism of translation questions is only valid if the set of vocabulary items is a rare one, or if ignorance of a few key words can make the whole passage incomprehensible. Otherwise "luck of the draw", if the luck is bad, is a euphemism for lack of knowledge of material which should have been known.

If translations test some items several times, this can be a reflection of the fact that some words and structures actually do have a greater frequency than others. It would be highly artificial to suppress this fact, though one should of course avoid setting translation passages which are unduly or pointlessly repetitive.

Subjectivity in marking of translation passages is a factor that need not be let obtrude itself at all at the secondary level, and certainly not in the Victorian Matriculation context. Presumably the subjectivity could be of two sorts, the grosser sort being the inconsistent marking of the same error, and the subtler sort being the inconsistent application of value judgments where fine shades of meaning are involved. In the examination context, both sorts are obviated by use of a comprehensive and rational marking scheme and a set of rulings on variants. In the teaching context, passages in which the latter sort could occur become the occasion for pointing out shades of meaning and developing pupils' discrimination.

Were marking of translation exercises to be found so subjective that a teacher was unable to predict within broad limits his pupils' chance of success in examinations, this would reflect on the inadequacy of his marking scheme or an unsatisfactory choice of passages rather than on translation as such.

The more general criticisms of translation are in many ways the more interesting ones, though answering them is less satisfying because the element of opinion looms larger. On the matter of whether academics are viewing foreign language teaching in schools too much from their own end of the process, asking for students fitted as well as possible to go on to university French, and ignoring the vast majority who will not, one can first of all reply that if this were a widespread view of academics, they would be asking for a number of other skills from matriculants — a knowledge of phonetics, some grounding in literary history, and an awareness of the issues involved in literary appreciation. This criticism sees university language departments as more specialized and esoteric than they really are. They are, after all, still dealing with the same language, and have a very clear idea of the capacity of the students who come to them.

If translation is advocated as an essential part of language courses it is because it deals in an organized and complete way with the transfer of meaning from one language to another. Regardless of what we may theorize about the nature of language, at the practical level translation is in many ways an inevitable fact.

It is this inevitability of the translation process which contradicts the proposition that it must ultimately disappear from language teaching. Even were it to be abolished as a formally recognizable element, we would still be translating, but only in a piecemeal fashion which would fall short of language as it is actually used.

Behind many of the arguments against translation there is I think an uneasy feeling that it is too hard. That it is or can be *hard* there is no doubt, and this is as it should be. Whether it is *too* hard depends firstly on whether the material for translation is properly graded to the ability of the group, and secondly on the attitude we adopt to mistakes. Are they so many blemishes on what should have turned out perfect, or are they so many opportunities for further learning?

Another reason why translation is deemed too hard is that it is left until too late in the teaching process, and it would become harder were it to disappear from the secondary school. At the risk of swimming against the current, I would like to say that far from eliminating translation even from the upper classes, we should introduce it in the lower ones in a properly graded way, and that the same principle applies to some other aspects of language work which eventually assume examinable status.

Although a syllabus naturally reflects a system of priorities, I think one of the grave drawbacks of a detailed syllabus is to encourage the attitude that it represents the most rather than the least that a pupil must be expected to know or be able to do. The same attitude is frequently seen in the matter of examination requirements. Many Victorian Matriculation candidates find the conversation section of the oral very difficult because they have not been encouraged to converse in French before Matriculation — after all, conversation is not examinable in Leaving!

If translation were to be discarded from examination requirements at a certain level, one

would doubtless see the emergence of a self-fulfilling prophecy — translation *would* be too hard, but without proving anything about translation itself, the nature of language, or the pupils' potential.

Finally, there is the criticism that correction of translation imposes a burden of dull monotony on the teacher. This begs the question of whether translation is necessary or not, and overlooks the fact that objective-format test marking, while certainly easy and rapid, is mechanical by its very nature, but with little possibility of being mechanized in schools.

What really matters is what can be done with translation scripts. In teaching they can be the occasion of an exposition and discussion in which pupils feel very much involved for a number of fairly obvious reasons which sum up the virtues of translation. They are developing their feeling for accuracy and their ability to distinguish shades of meaning, and having their attention drawn to questions of meaning which could not otherwise be asked. They are appreciating how reflection on the passage and its style, with a view to translation, greatly increases their understanding of it. Apart from grappling with the meaning of the passage, they are taking part in a meaningful process which is the very opposite of artificial. They are seeing how language actually works and thus acquiring a knowledge of structure and of comparative grammar. The elementary comparative linguistics entailed by translation and particularly by prose work constitute an indispensable part of the intellectual content of language study, the critical analysis of human expression.

Finally, what are the criteria which translation passages and in particular test passages must observe to make them as effective as possible?

- They must test a representative range of grammatical items, or else be directed at specific items.
- They must not depend too much on a single vocabulary sector.
- They must be clear, unambiguous, and authentic in style.
- They must be reasonably modern, and not demand special resources of style.
- They should be well within the ability of the average candidate, while giving some reward to the candidate with a wider vocabulary.
- They must not be too synthetic or contrived.